DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 675 PS 016 738

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TITLE A Developmental and Contextual Analysis of Continuity.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Baltimore, MD, April 23-26, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; *Developmental Continuity; *Research Methodology; *Research Needs; *Research Problems
IDENTIFIERS Conceptual Analysis; *Context Effect; Critical Analysis; *Process Research

ABSTRACT

Many studies measure developmental continuity in terms of an individual's maintenance of position on a given variable relative to the group studied. Such a measure is external to the individual and without reference to the function of the behavior for the individual. Research also tends to deal with variables rather than persons as the entities of interest. Studies have constructed a purely statistical relationship of similarity from a certain time in the course of development to a later time. However, if studies of continuity in development are to provide information about the course of development, an altered approach to research is needed. Such an approach would follow the course of development and attempt to ascertain the underpinnings that initiate, or subsequently promote, the behavior in question. This approach requires that the contexts of development be taken into account. By ignoring the potent consequences of enduring and temporary contexts, the context of developmental stage, and other contexts, such as that of measurement, researchers introduce unknown, and possibly serious, assessment errors and increase the likelihood that they will deal with surface similarities of behavior and neglect functional similarities. By taking contexts into account, researchers gain leverage in looking for multiple and alternative influences underlying development. (RH)

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SRCD Presentation
April 22-23, 1987

ED285675

A Developmental and Contextual Analysis of Continuity

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Most developmentalists, if pressed, would probably express some qualified belief in connectedness between earlier and later development. But beyond acceptance of the general notion that what is there in the child provides a basis for what follows, investigators hold quite different conceptions of what constitutes continuity and change, ask different questions about continuity, and use quite different kinds of evidence to make the case for continuity or discontinuity.

My starting point in discussing continuity is with the fact that the research literature is certainly not of one mind with regard to which behaviors show continuity or how much continuity exists. The fact that a small number of longitudinal studies stand as notable exceptions, does not, I believe, change the assessment. There is redundant evidence both for and against continuities -- the findings depending on the kinds of persons, situations, periods of development being investigated, as well as on the concepts and methods used. These inconsistencies in findings may reflect weaknesses in our research, or they may mean that we are tuning our questions and answers very precisely. Both are involved.

I would like to comment on some of the complexities that contribute to the Rorschach quality of this literature by (a) considering different concepts of continuity, (b) by asserting a critical viewpoint concerning measurement, and (c) suggesting some approaches to research on continuity and change.

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One can ask various questions about continuity. Does a specific behavior persist over time -- e.g., fear of dogs, compulsive washing of hands or door knobs, being truant from school. This kind of question will not concern us much. It is basically a census. Identical behavior is sufficient definition of continuity if curiosity ends there. It is not a very interesting developmental question.

We are far more likely to be concerned with a second type of question that involves continuity of a class or category of behavior which may change in form but retain conceptual continuity (e.g., aggression, inhibition, anxiety, dominance, self-concept, stress - tolerance, etc.). The literature contains a great many studies of this kind. Reviewers of this literature have the difficult task of coming up with a coherent and informative picture of findings: Some studies may look at aggressive behaviors on the playground when children are 4 and again at 8 years; others will have compared assaultive behavior at home and at school in preadolescence with 4 years later, etc. Actually, the evidence on aggression is much fuller and more coherent (an example, the Olweus research) than on most dimensions. For the most part research furnishes small parcels that are not easily integrated into a substantial body of evidence on a particular variable.

The measure of continuity in many of the studies is in terms of individuals maintaining their position on a given variable relative to the group that is being studied. It is a measure <u>external</u> to the individual and without reference to the <u>function</u> of that behavior (constant or changing) for the individual. There is a tendency to deal with <u>variables</u> as the entitites of interest rather than with <u>persons</u>. For example, "Activity level shows low to moderate correlations from infancy to 3 1/2 years, then drops from infancy to 6 years." "Girls'

dependency on females in middle childhood is related to dependency on males in adulthood." Correlations are moderate to low. What shall we do with these findings? If we are inclined to interpret a statistically significant correlation as evidence of continuity, we are on shakey grounds on prediction. We have the bothersome reality that many individuals do not conform to the statistical message. There are high active infants who remain high active in childhood and become high active adolescents and adults. There are dependent little girls who become bank presidents. Our gain in knowledge at the individual level is limited.

If we walk away from the low correlation, concluding that there is no continuity, we are left with various unsavory alternatives: That development is random. That earlier events are erased and have no relevance. The fascinating questions to which we want answers remain: How is the particular attribute maintained? What influences it? What happens to it in development? One might ask: Have we required enough of our methods and research approaches to learn what we want to learn?

Some of the disappointment derives from the fact that the predominant research emphasis has been on group analyses -- on a purely statistical construction of similarity from one point in time in development to a later one. We really do not know what happens within individuals, or why. If we intend that studies of continuity inform us concerning the course of development, an altered approach is needed. To quote Klaus Riegel, the study of development is the study of <u>process</u>, not <u>products</u>. We have mainly supplied ourselves with stockpiles of products rather than with understanding of mechanisms that account for the products.

A third and more complex conception of continuity is process-oriented. The course of development is followed, with a search for sequential inter-dependencies, which narrow the range of possible progressions. This approach begins with, or aims to evolve, an explanation regarding mechanisms contributory to the behavior. It attempts to ascertain the underpinnings that initiate the behavior, or subsequently enter to promote it. This view calls for a variety of related data sets, and, ideally, for longitudinal monitoring of development. Interest may be in a given class of behavior (e.g., shyness, emotion dysregulation) or in a theoretical later derivative of an earlier state, (e.g., a la Sroufe, from infant security in attachment to mother to ability to relate to peers in preschool).

The major advance by this approach is that the investigator goes the step beyond finding consistency over time, and beyond imposing on it an attractive explanation, to testing or verifying the proposed mechanism or trying out alternative explanations.

I will use a small example of this approach from research in our laboratory. In this example, we have taken an extreme group: a sample of families with multiple and serious impairments; namely, psychopathology in both parents, and harsh and unpredictable family environments. We identified a small number of children from these unlikely backgrounds who are maintaining a consistent level of well-being from 2 1/2 to 6 years, or from 6 to 9 years of age. These children are without serious social-emotional problems, are responding well to developmental demands, are doing well in school. Here is evident continuity; how is it explained? To try to identify underlying processes, hopefully common ones, we proceeded with intensive case studies of 4 children. We (Tracy Sherman and I) found a

distinguishing pattern of factors in these children. They were above average intelligence, generally healthy, and socially engaging. So, one might say that they had qualities that made it possible to use their environments optimally. These qualities, though perhaps necessary, were not sufficient conditions for their continued mental health successes. Common to all of them was a critical factor that drew out for them (though not their sibling) the maximum acceptance and love that their distressed families could give. Briefly, this factor was a match between a quality in the child and a strong and specific individual need or value in the parents. This match had been continuous from babyhood. The quality of match was different for each child. For example, a cuddly little girl, accepting-of-affection, and giving-of-affection was the match for her mother's great emotional neediness. This girl was by middle childhood becoming caregiver to her mother. (So the future may well hold problems.) One boy among our cases got his ill parents' love and attention because both parents highly value maleness. This baby, now child, fulfills their dream.

These case data allowed us to formulate a set of hypothesized processes to be tested. We then tested out our explanation on the total sample of 50 children from comparable backgrounds. Our group analysis supports our hypothesized process.

This illustrates one reasonable research approach to understanding coherence in development. It requires individual as well as group level analyses, and a detail of data over time. It takes us out of the practice of settling for beguiling explanations of continuities, without putting the explanations to test.

Now I would like to turn to another aspect of research on continuity. It is a concern about our perennial neglect of contexts as we measure

and interpret behavior over time. Although our disciplines have amply demonstrated that behavior is embedded in other behaviors, organized into patterned systems, and multiply influenced, this wisdom has often been abandoned in investigating continuities,-- where we have been willing to define behavior isolated from its contexts.

I would like to call attention to a number of ways in which these contexts are relevant in research on continuity. (1) One important context is the way in which a given behavior is organized within the individual. The same attribute can exist in very different kinds of persons. Thus, I am interested in altruistic behavior and its developmental continuity. I observe it in an aggressive, active, sociable 4-year-old (often his prosocial behavior is expressed by defending the weak or injured); I observe it with equal frequency in an insecure, quiet, loner. Functionally, the same behavior in the two children is quite different. What will I have established if I find some modest correlation over time for a group of children if I know only the frequency or presence of altruistic acts at successive measurements?

(2) Consider context in another sense. In a textbook on developmental social psychology written 50 years ago, Gardner and Lois Murphy discuss very eloquently issues of context and development. They speak of the little Texan and little Vermonter becoming visible in the preschooler -- in drawl, in manner and behavior, and in preoccupations. They were addressing cultural and socialization contexts that were impressively molding many kinds of child behavior in which one could already see the makings of the adult Texan and Vermonter. If we were to extract a single kind of child behavior to investigate for continuity -- let us say emotional expressivity (which one might stereotypically expect to have differed for

Texans and Vermonters in the 1930s) -- I would expect to find this trait to be differently organized within little Texans and Vermonters and to be subjected to very different socialization reinforcements and punishments. The resulting continuity of emotional expressivity might well differ in the two samples.

In our current research, we have found the consequences of contexts to be quite potent. The continuity question we were investigating concerns the stability of problem behaviors in children prior to adolescence. Forty-three sibling pairs (2 1/2-year-olds and 6-year-olds) were evaluated twice, three years apart. Twenty-eight percent of the young children and 40% of the older children remained in the same problem status over time. Of those with initial problems in each age group, about 40% shifted toward better status. We then looked at these children according to contrasting family contexts. The children came either from families in which life circumstances were pleasant and parents were well, or from families in which life circumstances were very chaotic and often parents were affectively ill. In the stable families, and the chaotic families about a third of the younger and older children remained in the same status over time. However, of children with problems at Time one, from stable families, 56% of the younger and 73% of the older moved toward no problem status; in the chaotic families, the corresponding percentages are 33% and 40%.

(3) The preceding examples are of enduring contexts. From the same study, the effects of a temporary stressful context are illustrated. Jeremy was diagnosed as extraordinarily anxious and inhibited at 3 years -- a puzzling child since his parents were well, competent, caring parents. When he returned at 6 years, he was neither anxious nor inhibited nor

showing any other problems. When Jeremy was seen at 3 years, the family had recently moved, and for a period of months had been caring for a young child who was dying of leukemia. Three years later, when these early stressors were no longer present, Jeremy was doing well. (These are obvious examples, but they are also the ingredients of studies in which isolated behavior measures are relied upon.)

There are other contexts equally relevant to behavioral assessment: (4) The context of developmental stage is one (e.g., cognitive stage, transitional periods). (5) The physiological contexts of behavior have become more prominent in behavioral studies. (6) Lastly, there is the situation of measurement itself. Whether we recognize it or not, our research is always the "prisoner" of contexts of measurement. Any context, whether temporary or enduring, has a history and meaning for the individual, which may affect the behavior we observe. Even the robust "Strange Situation" occasionally loses its stress-character. For the child for whom chronic stressful experiences at the hand of the mother predominate in his life, mother's leaving the room and returning may barely get over a threshold of stress.

In summary, I have taken the position that by ignoring contexts in studying continuity, we introduce unknown and possibly serious assessment errors. We are increasing the chances of dealing with surface similarities of behavior but not functional similarities.

Taking contexts into account, provides leverage in looking for multiple and alternative influences underlying development. By observing children (or variables) in relation to the behaviors and circumstances in which they are embedded, we can identify psychologically homogeneous groups of children whose development can be studied intensively. I believe our findings can be stronger and more meaningful. We will have an understanding of processes in continuity as well as products.